

Madame John's Legacy
632 Dumaine
New Orleans, La.

HABS No. LA-39

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36. NEW OR
16

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District of Louisiana

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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Historic American Buildings Survey
Richard Koch, District Officer
908 Queen & Crescent Bldg., New Orleans, La.

Addendum to
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New Orleans
Orleans Parish
Louisiana

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

MME. JOHN'S LEGACY

HABS No. LA-39

Location: 632 Dumaine Street, New Orleans, Orleans Parish, Louisiana.
Erected--1788
Architect--Unknown
Builder--Roberto Jones

This is the oldest and one of the most important dwellings in the Vieux Carre--and in fact, in the entire Mississippi Valley. The date of its building has been widely debated, but its type is pure Creole colonial of the earliest vintage.

Known by the fictional name of Mme. John's Legacy, this house has a history to match its architectural importance. Its name came from the story-teller, George Washington Cable, and while the tale of Mme. John--the pretty quadroon who inherited and lost this home of her patron and protector--is colorful, it bears no relationship to the true story of this house and the fabled people who lived here. These ancient walls have echoed to the family affairs of some of the most distinguished Creoles in this community.

Nothing in the Quarter looks quite like this today, yet once there were many houses of this type in the older parts of town. Built up on a brick wall, like a raised cottage, this house is of brick-between-posts--the local version of the half-timber house of Europe. Sheathing this friable surface is sturdy ship-lap siding.

The steep roof is hipped all around, with that peculiar pitch seen only on eighteenth century buildings, and now chiefly in the country. Its line descends swiftly from the ridgepole, then it kicks out at a slower angle until it extends over the entire gallery below. This broad gallery, appearing here on the front and rear, is enclosed by a wooden railing with wooden colonettes and balusters. The rather small windows are many-paned with broad muntins to hold the glazing, and all are finished with heavy batten shutters.

This is the kind of house that prospering colonists built after they progressed from the first rude little cabin-type dwellings. It was up off the ground and safe from frequent floodings. The broad galleries gave protection from sun and rain. It was snug with its thick walls, shuttered windows, and the enclosed basement area. And it was spacious enough to permit a comfortable, even luxurious way of life. While this is not a building of particular refinement of detail, the roof line has an elegant sweep, there is an air of amplitude and hospitality, a certain grace and charm that give distinction. This is folklore architecture of a degree of sophistication that bespeaks the end, rather than the beginning of a phase.

Early maps like the Gonichon indicate, by roof lines, that such dwellings dotted the area by 1731. Indeed, on this plot

of ground, measuring 60' by 120' F.M. at the corner of Royal and Dumaine Streets, the Gonichon Map features just such a house and of about the same proportions. Yet it is doubtful that this is the same structure; for the house drawn on this map was closer to Royal Street and was set deeper in the lot. Flanking it on either side was a smaller building, one located precisely at the corner--as appeared on the earlier maps--and another equidistant from the house on the farther property line. The de Latour Map of 1722 and the Broutin Map of 1728 do not indicate that a big house had yet been built on this lot. Yet by 1731 the Gonichon Map shows a house is here. One can conclude then that a larger dwelling was built here some time between 1728 and 1731.

Few properties in the Vieux Carre are as well documented as this. The record of its ownership descends in a clear true line. To whom this land was given when the engineer de Pauger laid out the town in 1721 is not clear. Perhaps to no one. But by 1728 the Broutin Map lists Pascal at this site. Since Jean Pascal was a ship's captain for the Company of the Indies, and the development company passed out parcels of land like this freely to its own people, he may well have been the original owner of this plot.

Maps, census data, the report of an Indian massacre at the Natchez Post, a marriage contract, letters granting power of attorney, and two mortgages serve as a record of this property from 1722 to the 1770s. During this entire time it was in the possession of one woman.

This woman, Elizabeth Real, was the wife of Captain Jean Pascal, from Provence, to whom the land had been granted by 1728. According to a general census, Jean Pascal was living with his wife and child on Royal Street by 1726. He was killed by Indians November 28, 1729 at Natchez, and his widow later married her next door neighbor, an inn-keeper named Francois Marin. Undoubtedly the house appearing on the Gonichon Map served as an inn for some time. Francois Marin died before 1744, for in a document of that date Mme. Pascal-Marin was again listed as a widow.

Mme. Elizabeth Pascal-Marin was still living and was described as "ill in body because of her great age, but sound in spirit" when she made her will in 1769. In 1771 another will was drawn up for her in which she corroborated her marriages to Jean Pascal and Francois Marin, and mentioned "...I declare for my goods the house of my residence and the other house contiguous to it placed in Dumaine Street and making corner with Royal Street."

Evidently there were two substantial houses on this property by that time, for in 1776, when she sold off the Royal Street corner portion of her plot to Juan Bautista Laporte, she described it as "a house composed of 72' frontage with 22' of width, a little more or less, which house forms a raised pavillion on a brick wall, that comprises one half, and the other half forms a low house, constructed on a plot of 72'6" frontage, on 32' of depth, situated at and making the corner of Royal Street and the

street of the warehouses...the same belongs to me for having had it constructed." This may have been a completely new house built by Mme. Pascal-Marin, or an extension may have been made to the little corner building appearing on the very earliest maps.

Some time before October 16, 1777 Mme. Elizabeth Real Pascal-Marin died, and the property was inherited by her grandson, Don Francisco Goudeau, 2nd Lieutenant in the Battalion of Louisiana. His father, who had been the King's Surgeon General at the Matchitoches post, had married Marie Pascal, daughter of Elizabeth Real by Jean Pascal. In a short while the grandson sold the property to Santiago Lemelle, and from this point documents on the house and lot are plentiful in the Notarial Archives.

On July 30, 1778 the property was sold once more, this time to Rene Beluche, a sea captain whose corsair "The Spy" was said to ply the waters around Barataria before the Lafitte brothers began plundering there. At any rate, legend has always said there was pirate treasure stashed away in the cavernous depths under the house, or to be more accurate, under the house that existed originally on this lot. When Captain Beluche bought this house it was described as "a lot of ground with an old house and kitchen."

Mme. Pascal-Marin, it will be remembered, in 1776 sold off the corner lot, measuring F.M. 72'6" on Royal by 32' on Dumaine, to Juan Bautista Laporte. This Laporte was the father-in-law of Captain Rene Beluche, and according to the last will and testament of Mme. Dominica Joly, widow of Laporte, Rene Beluche ceded her 18' along the line that divided their properties as payment for work done by her husband, Laporte, "on the house owned by Beluche which he later sold to Lanzos."

This statement poses a problem. The 18' ceded to Mme. Laporte brings the corner lot up to its present dimensions. However, the original house that appeared on the Gonichon Map lay right athwart this 18'. Beluche would not have ceded land containing a portion of a house; so the old dwelling must have disappeared by this time. Mme. Laporte mentioned that the house her husband helped Beluche with was later sold to Lanzos. Had another house already been built in a different spot on this lot? To confound the problem there is in existence a building contract, dated April 1, 1788, between Manuel de Lanzos and the Master Carpenter, Roberto Jones, for a building that answers the description of the present structure known as Mme. Johns.

This Manuel de Lanzos, Captain of the Fixed Regiment at the Plaza, was a man of consequence who had been considered for the post of civil and military commandant at Mobile. Since it was also mentioned in a dispatch that he suffered from gout, he may have been disqualified, but he was, nonetheless, a man who conducted himself and his military service with valor. In 1783 de Lanzos purchased this property from Rene Beluche. On March 21, 1788 a great fire destroyed much of the Old Square, and according to record this property would have been on the fringe of the fire. At any rate, a few weeks later we find de Lanzos contracting for a new house, and in this document de Lanzos agrees to give Don

Roberto Jones "...all the ironwork which he has salvaged from his burned houses."

Certain it is that if de Lanzos did rebuild this house after the fire he did it in the old-fashioned way, undoubtedly rescuing as much as he could from the ruins and recreating the kind of house his family had known before the fire. For twenty-five more years the de Lanzos family enjoyed this house, described in an inventory as "a house of 50' of length by about 50' of width, of six chambers and a small cabinet with gallery in front and rear and three warehouses underneath; a kitchen of two chambers, a small cabinet, latrines, etc."

When de Lanzos died the estate was purchased in 1813 by the well-known attorney, Dominique Seghers who, in addition, bought all the neighboring land from the widow of Don Andres Armesto to make into a spacious garden. Here the Seghers lived with a degree of luxury remarkable for its day. An inventory, made on Mme. Segher's death in 1819, described in detail the contents of this charming home. The great furniture maker, Francois Seignouret, acted as an appraiser, and the list of possessions indicate cultivated people of means.

Among the elegant things listed were porcelain tea sets, gilded pier glass mirrors, a piano-forte, French clocks, sofas, tables, and chairs, a tea table, a Chinese laquer gaming box, armoirs and vast canopied beds. Each room was inventoried giving a picture of comfort and convenience scarcely expected at this time.

Clothes listed in the armoirs are fine and fashionable, including corsets and silk stockings, dozens of linen handkerchiefs, cartons of laces, kid gloves, shoes and dresses aplenty. Household furnishings include fine draperies, damask tablecloths and dozens of napkins, trimmed pillow cases and sheets. There were musical instruments, backgammon sets, matched liqueur bottles, cases of French soap, hogsheds and cases of fine wines.

But the ultimate in elegance lay in Mme's. jewel box. Here was a gold comb set in diamonds valued at \$2,500; a crescent shaped pin with diamonds valued at \$1,800; a necklace of fine pearls with a plate of diamonds mounted in openwork at \$1,200; pearl and diamond bracelets, diamond earrings, diamond rings and medallions...the whole valued at \$6,690.

Not to be outdone by the splendor of Mme's. jewel box, the library of Dominique Seghers was remarkable for its day. The inventory lists around 1,250 volumes to say nothing of pamphlets, charts, maps, etc. Contained here was an excellent law library as well as an erudite collection of other books bespeaking a man whose interests ranged far and wide.

In this inventory a description of the house is given as "a principal house composed of six large apartments, galleries front and rear, and an uncovered gallery on the South side giving on the garden with two closets on the rear gallery; an attic which extends over the whole house, and a store under the house; plus a kitchen in the yard with a chamber adjoining

and a gallery; plus in the back yard a wooden building serving as a wash house, and which principal house is built of colombage as well as the kitchen building..." From the inventoried contents of each room it is possible to reconstruct this house as it was in 1819, with a parlor, library, and bedroom on the front gallery, and a dining room and two other bedrooms off the rear gallery.

It is a sad commentary on all this pleasant living that within a year after Mme's. death Dominique Seghers lost his property, and it was picked up in a sheriff's sale by Maurice Prevost. Two months later it was bought as a town house by Mme. Marie Louise Patin Roman, widow of Jacques Etienne Roman, early cattle rancher from the Opelousas country who also owned a big sugar plantation in St. James Parish. Mme's oldest children were already grown, but undoubtedly these halls saw their frequent visits, and the younger ones were reared here. One son, Andre Bienvenue Roman, served twice as Governor of Louisiana. Another, Jacques Telesphore Roman, married the daughter of a neighbor, Joseph Pilie, who lived around the corner. It was for Marie Therese Celina Josephine Pilie that he built the beautiful Oak Alley Plantation house. The only daughter of Mme. Roman, Josephine, married Valcour Aime, who owned the princely plantation, Le Petit Versailles.

Here Mme. Roman lived until her death in 1831 when the property was inherited by her youngest son, Sosthene Roman. In 1836 it was sold to Barthelemy Jourdain who owned other property in the square, and when he suffered reversals it was picked up by Jean Martial Dupieris. Three years later Mrs. Manette Trudeau Kerr, daughter of the prominent Trudeau family and wife of the well-known doctor, Josias Elliott Kerr, bought the old house, and shortly afterwards it was purchased by William C. C. Claiborne, II, son of the famous statesman. This property remained in Claiborne hands until 1892, growing more legendary with the passing years.

In 1925 it was acquired by Mrs. Isaac Ivan Lemann, who with wisdom and generosity gave this venerable building to the Louisiana State Museum to be cherished, protected and enjoyed by all the people.

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